

Jesus Christ has true authority

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Revd Rebecca Newland

Epiphany 4, 29 January 2012

Deut 18:15-20, Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28.

The season of Epiphany tries to answer this question: who is Jesus? This year we look primarily to the Gospel of Mark to find the answer. In fact one reason the Gospel was written was to settle the question about exactly who Jesus was. The overwhelming picture you get of Jesus from this gospel is of a powerful, decisive man with a sense of purpose and great inner strength. There is no dithering about in this gospel. No long monologues. It is all action and conviction. Jesus has authority, power, compassion and fortitude. He says a word and it happens. He takes the lead and people follow. As Mark put it, Jesus had authority.

I had a very close look at authority just yesterday [as we witnessed David rescue two swans entangled in fishing line in the lake. David is a wildlife biologist. He knew just what to do.] This was authority used for a good and loving purpose.

But I am personally very challenged by the whole idea of authority. My father was the closest thing to an anarchist I have ever met. When I say anarchist I do not mean someone who goes around blowing up buildings willy-nilly. The word anarchy comes from the Greek *anarchos*, which means without rulers. Fundamentally anarchists oppose authority of any kind. Like a Russian anarchist of old my father would always challenge me to doubt and question all authority – even his own.

We all know the terrible abuses of authority we witness in the world — from parents who abuse children to leaders who commit their people to war and violence. I think we are right to be sceptical. We are right to doubt authority. Those with authority are by and large easily corrupted and they do not let go or give away their power and control easily.

We could say too that at this point in time that all the freedoms and liberties we enjoy in our western democracies, have been won by those who have challenged authority. The rule of law, the vote, women's suffrage, civil rights and more have all been based in challenging authority. One of the defining characteristics of the reformation and the enlightenment was the nature of authority — who or what had our ultimate allegiance? Was it Rome or King? Was it King and country or scripture? Was it rational thought or blind obedience? And the really big question — was it yourself or some outside influence?

Perhaps that was why, in the end, I found it easy to move from the Catholic Church to the Anglican. I remember my Anglican Foundations lecturer Bishop Roger Herft saying that it is the idea of Protest in Protestantism that makes it the most relevant and still compelling in our day and age.

But it is protest in balance. The idea in the Anglican Church is that we keep in balance the four authorities — scripture, the tradition, reason and experience. During the reformation debates about these issues tore both state and church apart. The genius of the Anglican approach is that it makes a fair go at reconciling these competing authorities. Scripture is central but it must be interpreted via the clear light of reason. But our reason is limited so we need wise counsel from other voices, the tradition, the saints who have gone before us. And experience is in there because the Spirit sends us the new to shape and challenge us. While I have found this approach to be useful and intellectually rigorous, I still find authority difficult. The most confronting of my ordination vows was the one where I promised obedience to my Bishop and his delegates. I believe I am not alone. I took great heart from the

fail-safe clause that obedience was only required in all things lawful. However, it was still about submission to an outside authority.

At the time of Jesus such questions did not exist, at least in the way they do in our culture. For the people of first century Palestine it was not a question about authority itself. That you had to submit was not in question. The question was to whom were you going to submit; some of the options included your parents, your husband, the Roman authorities, religious prophets and of course God. Into this cauldron of divided loyalties and wishful thinking steps Jesus. He enters the synagogue and begins to teach them about the Kingdom of God as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Why did Mark feel the need to make this distinction? I think this question gets to one of the core things about Jesus.

The usual teachers of the time were the scribes and priests. They were the literate ones. With the Pharisees, they were the self-appointed guardians of Jewish ancestral traditions, the law. When they taught they always said ‘as Moses said’, or ‘as Rabbi so and so said’. They looked to authorities outside of themselves to bolster their arguments and win their points. In contrast Jesus spoke with a quiet but compelling authority all of his own.

I think we forget how radical this way of teaching was. It has been said the way Jesus lived and taught laid the groundwork for our Western individualism. Jesus is his own man. He stands on his own. He is like the revolutionary who questions the accepted norms and teachings of his day. He does not accept any teaching or authority on face value. He looks, examines, questions and decides for himself. Remember how he confronts every accepted piece of traditional lore? He looks at them all in the light of his own experience and knowledge — not any one else’s. But importantly we know that he examines everything from the framework of an intimate relationship with God. In this way he is not like the modern day self-sufficient Western individual. His very being is embedded in a mutual relationship of love.

So as his own man he speaks his truth but his ability to do this is made up primarily of love. In our Corinthians reading there is that beautiful verse — “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up”. When Jesus speaks his truth it is not from a place of conceit. It is grounded in love. It is love that drives Jesus to confront and challenge accepted authority. He is not a revolutionary chasing his own glory and power. He is not an anarchist challenging authority to prove he is independent because his avowed philosophy tells him to do so. He is the embodiment of love speaking words of freedom for all. Along with love he has integrity — he says what he means and does what he says.

This all makes for a man with compelling authority. And this is what the demons recognise. They are rightly terrified and knocked off balance. Here is someone who will not lie down and roll over. Here is someone who can stand and confront. There is nothing in the world that can stop Jesus being who and what he is called to become. There is nothing that can stop his healing and redeeming power.

The man in our gospel story is greatly in need of healing. He is powerless and in control of the unclean spirit who manipulates his actions and speech. There have been many cross-cultural studies of the phenomenon of possession and they point to a number of common characteristics. In essence an evil spirit or spirits seem to take control of the person. They appear to be destructive and negative forces that bring pain and suffering to the victim and those around them. I suspect we all feel uncomfortable with this talk of demons. It is so medieval and alien to our modern sensibilities.

We understand also that possession and voices in the head are much more likely to have a basis in mental illness, something that causes great suffering to those who must live with it.

But however we understand demons in this enlightened age we can probably agree that they at least stand for what opposes wholeness and healing.

Walter Wink in *Engaging the Powers* believes we need to think more widely about what possession might mean. Doing just that he writes, “Our society is possessed, Christians as much as anyone. We are possessed by violence, possessed by sex, possessed by money, possessed by drugs.”¹

The fact is that there are countless forms of authority in our modern culture. There are countless idols to which we bow down and worship. We like to think we are independent and free. We like to think we make our own decisions and are not unduly influenced by others. We like to think we have thrown off the shackles of tyranny and ditched abusive authority. However the truth is we are more often than not enthralled to our idols, possessed by our fears and the stories we are fed by the media.

In front of us stands Jesus who says, look, see and examine. Follow me and I will lead you into truth. Truth you can discover and choose for yourself. Love you can live in. Integrity you can grow into. The compelling thing about Jesus is that he does not promise us the world. He doesn't say ‘follow me and all power and glory will be yours’. He says follow me, and gain your life — your life, no one else's, your own.

Let us pray . . .

¹ Walter Wink. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992